

# ‘Things should be better’ – Immobility, labour and the negotiation of hope amongst young Ghanaian craftsmen

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/epd](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/epd)**Niamh Jane Clifford Collard**

SOAS University of London, UK

## Abstract

Drawing on an ethnography of life in a Ghanaian weaving workshop, this article traces the intersections between young rural weavers’ affective labour, hope and their experiences of immobility. Hope is explored as an ambivalent resource which shapes the shared, social materiality of their craftwork, the spiritual beliefs which give meaningful shape to the challenges of craft livelihoods and the imaginaries and lived experiences which compose young weavers’ sense of migration and mobility. Entangled in the precarious logics of late capitalism, these hopes simultaneously offer young craftsmen a sense of existential mobility, whilst curtailing and circumscribing possibilities for sustained and systemic change. In this, the ‘not-yet’ hopefulness of immobility is examined as a complex affective and political field, shot through with tense anticipation, longing and disappointment.

## Keywords

Abjection, affect, craftwork, hope, immobility, labour, uncertainty, Ghana

Hope is a complex, unstable and slippery thing, emergent in crisis, from the depths of despair and bound to the future’s ever-receding horizons. In contexts of protracted and systemic immobility, where movement, both existential and bodily, is thwarted through the foreclosure of opportunities and uncertain livelihoods, hope’s urgency is matched only by its fragility. Drawing on stories of life in a Ghanaian weaving workshop, this article looks at

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## Corresponding author:

Niamh Jane Clifford Collard, SOAS University of London, 10 Thornhaugh Street, London WC1H 0XG, UK.

Email: [nc32@soas.ac.uk](mailto:nc32@soas.ac.uk)

how labour, immobility and hope intersect in the lives of young craftsmen, focusing on craftwork, religious practices and imaginings of migration. The ethnography explores the temporal strategies that orient young craftsmen towards the future, giving shape to hopefulness as something that is negotiated in the everyday flow of triumphs, disappointments and getting by. Sustained through the routines of young weavers' lives however, this hopefulness constituted its own set of limitations, stuckedness comprising a political position inscribed within the promise of existential mobility.

GD was the first weaver I met when I made a day trip to Kpetoe, a town clinging to the southern reaches of the Ghana–Togo border, in August 2010. I was a student of anthropology and art history, enraptured by southern Ghana's vibrant traditions of *kente* weaving, and he was a young craftsman at work in his loom. Composed of strips of finely hand-woven textiles sewn together, edge to edge, to form striking combinations of colour and pattern, Ghanaian *kente* cloth is a potent symbol of both national pride and local heritage. Commissioned largely by local middle class patrons to be worn on formal occasions, with a much smaller market amongst the diaspora, to wear *kente* cloth is to stake bold claims both to cultural tradition and the dynamism of fashion. The rich symbolism of *kente* within Ghana's national imaginary and local heritage politics, however, often stood at odds with the everyday struggles faced by many of the young men who wove the cloth (see Clifford Collard, 2021).

A first-time visitor, I had ended up stranded in the village weaving workshop in the middle of a torrential downpour. Sheltering from the rain as I waited for a *tro-tro*<sup>1</sup> to take me back to the regional capital, GD got up from his loom to speak to me. Whilst everyone else kept on with their weaving, he showed me carefully crafted strips of *agbamevo kente*<sup>2</sup> in brilliant oranges, blues and greens, draping one across his body as he posed, shoulders back and face forward, for a photograph in front of his cloths. When I came back to Kpetoe to do fieldwork two years later, GD was once again the first member of the workshop to approach me and, remembering his quiet confidence from that day in the rain, I asked him if he would teach me about his work. He negotiated my entry into the workshop as an apprentice, helping me gain the assent of community elders and organising for a new loom of bright blond wood to be built next to his. Between September 2012 and November, the following year, we sat side by side as I fumblingly learnt the rudiments of the craft from him and his workshop colleagues.

At the beginning of summer 2015, I returned once more to Kpetoe and this time GD invited me to join him one Sunday at his church, Mighty Jesus Prayer Ministries. We left early, travelling alone in a *tro-tro* to a half-completed building along the road which bisected the town north to south, linking it to the coast. Inside the congregation gave praise, dancing and singing in exultant worship to music performed by the church band and amplified through a stack of overworked, crackly speakers. After the service was over, GD took me around the back of the church to show me the home of the church leader, a radio phone-in personality called prophet Victor Mensah. A multi-storey affair complete with balustraded balconies which, like the church hall itself, was still in the process of completion, GD took obvious pride in the opulence of his pastor's home. It became clear that the building of the house and the church itself exerted a powerful allure for GD, speaking to him of a sense of momentum and progress which stood in stark contrast to the impasse GD felt himself to be in. He, like many of the other craftsmen I came to know in Ghana, told me that times were hard and that life working in the loom in a quiet place like Kpetoe was becoming untenable as commissions for cloths, ever erratic and uncertain, had dried up almost entirely. Shortly after, GD left for Accra on the promise of a job with a relative there

and we lost touch; another friend from the workshop told me he has yet to return and I often wonder where he has ended up and what he is doing now.

Infused with longing, persistent hope and the ever-present hustle of getting by when the stuckedness of life is felt sharply as a foreclosing of opportunities (Hage, 2009b), GD's story is, in an important sense, unremarkable. The thread he drew when narrating his life mirrored that of many of the young men I knew in the Kpetoe workshop, to the extent that they shared an impatient and demanding hope that although they might be forced to wait, life held the promise of much more than their current situation allowed. These impatient demands were mirrored in the workshop's name, *agbenenyo*, which in Agotime Ewe, the language most widely spoken in Kpetoe, meant 'things should be better'. Resonating through my encounters in the field and the writing that has followed, the restless imperative that *things indeed should be better* holds within it the anxious promise and disappointment which characterise young weavers' engagement with and in the world. This tension speaks to the contemporary experience of young men in Africa, caught uncertainly between hope and despair.

Looking primarily at GD's story, this article pays critical attention to what the demand that 'things should be better' means in the lives of young Ghanaian weavers, opening up an ethnographic window onto the tense and productive relationship between immobility, labour, craftwork and hope amongst young men in African contexts. Implicated in young men's stalled transition to adulthood, the complex intersection between work, labour, hope and mobility was highly gendered, young women facing their own set of challenges when it came to attaining social maturity (see Gilbert, 2015). Particular focus is given here to the assemblages of material and discursive fragments which gave rise to a complex and often contradictory sense of hope that was grounded both in the attainment of skilled work and in the everyday labours of getting by. The sensuality of GD's technicolour cloths, his pastor's home in the midst of its construction and the word *agbenenyo* itself, when pieced together point to the potency of hope shot through with uncertainty, and the ways in which these various strands are given shape through the enmeshing of work and labour. The ethnography explores the routine and multifaceted labours of getting by as socially negotiated temporal strategies that, in orienting young men to the future, gives a certain shape and meaning to the challenges they experience in the present. Composed of weavers' work in the loom, their laborious cultivation of affective, social ties and their religious commitments, these practices open up horizons of possibility, whilst simultaneously curtailing what is thinkable and doable for young weavers.

Crucial here is an appreciation of how the messy political economies of late capitalism so unequally distributes the stuff of life – money, jobs, time and material things – that these young men experience their lives as at least partially refracted through a lens of abjection (see Ferguson, 1999: 236) in which they feel themselves to be left waiting whilst the rest of the world moves on (see Hage, 2009a: 3; Honwana, 2013). Unlike the miners who populate Ferguson's ethnography of faltering industrialisation in Southern Africa, however, most of Kpetoe's workshop weavers had never known wages or unionised labour. Born in the midst of structural adjustment programmes that radically reoriented the role of government and the public sector in Ghana from 1983 onwards, young weavers' feelings of abjection came not from an attachment to past experiences of secure and valued work, for no such work had ever existed for most of them. Rather, their abjection was anchored in the potent future imaginaries of education, Pentecostal spiritualities and migration, whose compelling promises of social recognition, success and material comfort were felt as a painful and humiliating lack in the here-and-now.

In a context of endemic crisis, in which ‘uncertainty has become [the] dominant trope’ (Cooper and Pratten, 2015: 1) to wait is to subject oneself to the possibility of indefinite stasis, the regaining of mobility and forward momentum cast into doubt. But in this stuck-ness also lies the possibility of new forms of sociality, as the normalcy of waiting gives way to the valorisation of endurance, whereby ‘...enduring the crisis becomes the normal mode of being a good citizen and the more one is capable of enduring a crisis the more of a good citizen one is’ (Hage, 2009b: 104). The complex entanglements between young people’s experiences of stalled progress, frustrated hope and the emergence of new and creative modes of negotiating chronic uncertainty have been explored in the literature on waithood (Honwana, 2013: 165–166). In disrupting transitions to adulthood, young people’s experiences of waiting open up non-linear temporalities that ‘...ebb...and flow...between opportunity and set-back, hope and disappointment...’ (Thieme, 2018: 531). These times and spaces of waiting, replete with the not-yet of anticipated futures, are also ripe with dreams (see Schielke, 2015: 42). In being open to the possibilities of a future which is yet to be determined, experiences of waiting and immobility are compellingly ambivalent, a Janus-faced amalgam of hope and despair (see Anderson, 2006: 733).

Bringing literatures of waiting (Honwana, 2013; Mains, 2007; Masquelier, 2013) and hope (Mains, 2012; Miyazaki, 2004; Zigon, 2009), into conversation with an ethnography of craftwork, this article examines the social properties of endurance in the workshop. In this, cycles of affective labour sustain life through purposive action and a hopeful commitment to that which is just beyond the horizon, forming the basis for the work of weaving and imagining futures which might be different. In tying young men in place, importantly circumscribing action and generating ambiguous attachment to craftwork, these labours of hope were inherently political and bound up with the tense relationship between abjection, desire and uncertainty that characterises late capitalist affect. Of particular interest is the three-way relationship between what Hirokazu Miyazaki, drawing on Ernst Bloch, conceptualises as the ‘not-yet’ dimension of hope unfulfilled<sup>3</sup> (Miyazaki, 2004: 9), Kpetoe weavers’ attachment to relative material comfort in the here-and-now, and their disciplined Pentecostalist faith in blessed destinies to come. This commitment to hope persists in spite of, or perhaps because of, the perpetual disappointment inherent to the search for fulfilment in a time and place characterised not simply by a lack of opportunities, but by chronic uncertainty. Of this ambivalence, Bloch (1998: 341 quoted in Anderson, 2006: 733) writes ‘hope...dwells in the region of the not-yet, a place where entrance and, above all, final content are marked by an enduring indeterminacy’. In this state, the alluring plethora of imagined and hoped-for possibilities – for work, mobility and relationships – cedes ground to the existential insecurity of craftsmen trying to feed, clothe and house themselves when the materials of life are scarce. Put simply then, the ethnography traces how, when insecurity is a condition of, rather than incidental to ideas of work, hope and immobility, the affective labour of keeping going propels young weavers towards the future and helps them build their ideas of the ‘good life’ (see Fischer, 2014).

## Labour and affect

The question of livelihoods, and how weavers sustain themselves through the careful intertwining of social and material resources, underpins this ethnography. Attempts to unpick the web of weavers’ social resources – their friendships, favours, wit and charm – from the concrete stuff of crafting cloth leave us with little but an unhelpful binary (see Clifford Collard, 2016). Drawing a distinction between work and labour can, however, help us understand the complex entanglements at play between sociality, making and the (re)

production of liveable lives. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt (1958: 136) delineates the two, describing work in the following terms:

The work of our hands... fabricates the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice. They are mostly, but not exclusively, objects for use and they possess the durability Locke needed for the establishment of property, the "value" Adam Smith needed for the exchange market, and they bear testimony to productivity, which Marx believed to be a test of human nature.

Labour is distinct, in that it is immediately concerned with the unrelenting demands of reproducing life. Of this, Arendt (1958: 98–99) writes:

... unlike working, whose end has come when the object is finished... *laboring* always moves in the same circle... Whatever labor produces is meant to be fed into the human life process almost immediately, and this consumption, regenerating the life process, produces- or rather, reproduces- new "labor power," needed for further sustenance of the body.

In the context of Kpetoe's young weavers, work can be usefully understood as those activities and dispositions directly associated with the imagining, planning and production of beautiful cloths.<sup>4</sup> Labour on the other hand was the ongoing and intractable process whereby craftsmen not only sustained themselves bodily through the 'art of earning money' (Arendt, 1958: 143) which weavers developed alongside their craft, but also forged the social ties that underpinned their livelihoods. These social ties demanded unceasing attention, and the continual care that went into tending them constituted a kind of affective labour that underpinned crafting livelihoods and was driven by an effort to sustain and reproduce life itself (see Arendt, 1958: 87). In being directed towards the unrelenting demands of life and the need to keep going, weavers' social and affective activities took on the quality of labour.

Of course, work and labour are not discrete entities, and the labour of sustaining their lives both physically and socially was the basis upon which weavers' craftwork subsisted and was essentially entangled. It is here that my reading of work and labour departs from Arendt's, in that, through the prism of the workshop ethnography, I see labouring, and the hopeful commitment to keep going in spite of life's disappointments, as the basis upon which creative and fulfilling work is made possible. In this enmeshed picture, affect offers a way of thinking about how the social and the material are braided together in weavers' lives, labours and work. Produced in and through the workshop, affect binds crafting bodies, tools, the labours of making a living and the spaces of work together through particular affordances, resonances and disjunctures. In this, affect refers to a realm beyond semantics or the discursive (Massumi, 1995: 85; Weszkalnys, 2016: 128), in which webbed social and material relations course through both the labouring bodies of craftsmen and the stuff of their work, opening up onto the sensations of being in and belonging to the workshop space (Navaro-Yashin, 2009: 13; Seigworth and Gregg, 2009: 3). To speak of affect in terms of young weavers' labour is to highlight the conjoined social and material processes which compose life in the workshop and thus simultaneously make possible and constrain the work of weaving. Put another way, affective labour harnesses weavers' embodied experience of desire and the potentiality of hope to the weighty, and often burdensome, material and economic realities of their lives, in the workshop and beyond. By casting the bodily experience of labouring in the loom as both emerging from, and productive of, late capitalist logics of fragile hope and the uncertain promises of existential mobility, affect powerfully

situates the sensuous dimension of weavers' lives within capitalism's broader historical trajectories (Weszkalnys, 2016: 128), reminding us, as Mazzarella writes, that 'the senses... have their histories' (2012: 293).

### The materiality of weaving and being 'stuck in the loom'

The relationship between affect, immobility, hope, craftwork and labour in the lives of young weavers, can be usefully grounded in an understanding of both the social and material realities of producing cloth. *Agbamevo kente* was prized as a material instantiation of local heritage, with weavers taking pride in their work and the skilful imagination that went into crafting intricate new patterns and mastering complex weaving techniques. The process of weaving cloths was thus not only grounded in a politics of place that indexed authenticity to immobility (see below and Clifford Collard, 2021), but also demanded engaged patience. Sat in the loom, wooden shuttles of carefully spun warp threads were painstakingly thrown back and forth, as weavers carefully picked out brightly coloured geometric designs in the textile. A full cloth took several weeks to weave, with complex and intricate designs taking longer. The craft itself thus became a bodily practice of purposeful and structured waiting for each piece to be finished, the weaver measuring time passed in progress towards a completed cloth. The routines and discipline of the loom gave time a shape which became less definite once the weaver stepped away from the loom and began the difficult task of finding a market for their work. One of the products of this engaged waiting was a kind of discipline, particular to late capitalism, which underpinned the affective labour of weaving and envisioned the frustrations of the present opening up onto the possibilities, however uncertain, of the future (Stasik et al., 2020: 3; see also Honwana, 2013).

In the face of an uncertain wait for customers, there was pride to be had in seeking financial independence. It was with a certain sense of distinction that workshop weavers said that they 'wove for themselves'. Selling their cloths directly to middle-class customers with whom they had developed relationships of patronage, rather than being entangled in contractual relations with middle men themselves, workshop weavers often supplemented their production with pieces made to contract and bought from younger weavers who wove at home. This placed them on the upper rungs of the hierarchy in the local crafting community, affording workshop members a certain cachet and meaning that the money made from the sale of their cloths was their own.

Profit margins were, however, extremely slim, and the faltering of the Ghanaian economy at large during 2013 and 2014 was felt acutely in the weaving workshop. The sliding value of the Ghana Cedi increased the cost of the yarns that weavers worked with, and the failure of the state to pay its employees in a timely fashion dented demand for *agbamevo kente* amongst government employees, who constituted the main market for hand woven cloth.<sup>5</sup> Whilst it never reached Ghana, weavers were certain that the West African Ebola epidemic of 2014–2015 had also curtailed international travel to the region, putting paid to the limited tourist market for *kente* accessories crafted from their cloths.

It is against the backdrop of this economic uncertainty that despite the consummate skill involved in weaving, it was seen as a kind of 'stop-gap' occupation. Keenly aware of how little control they had over broader economic forces, boys and young men engaged with the craft to earn money whilst pursuing work and learning opportunities elsewhere, weaving forming an important socially sanctioned staging post along much longer hoped-for vocational and educational trajectories. Processes of socialisation within the crafting community taught learner weavers that whilst there was considerable pride to be had in producing beautiful cloths and gaining mastery in the craft, they should aim for a life beyond the



loom. From this perspective, its value ultimately rested upon the access young men hoped it would afford them to formal education and the social recognition of a salaried job. Soumhya Venkatesan's (2010: 157) ethnography of mat weavers in Southern India points to a similar dynamic, whereby pride in craftwork was bound up with its role as a means to earn the money weavers needed to fulfil social obligations, including marriage and other life-cycle events.

In this the craft occupied a deeply ambiguous role in the lives of the young men who practised it. Learning to weave was then, not just about learning a set of craftwork skills, but also learning how to labour and make a living in the here-and-now. In this conjoined process of learning to work and to labour, young men developed the imagination, creativity and flair which came with becoming an artisan, but also the self-discipline, social skills and resilience that they hoped would prepare them for future, hopefully more lucrative and sustainable, occupations. In a context of economic uncertainty and foreclosed opportunities, however, hoped-for routes out of the craft were limited (see Cant, 2018: 64), and craftwork also became a practise of learning to wait. Stuck in the loom, balancing the work of weaving with agricultural labour and other livelihood strategies, young weavers embodied the struggle to bridge the gap between their hoped-for futures elsewhere and the impasse they found themselves in.

The intimacy of this impasse was marked in the bodily practises that entwined tools, material, time and the body in the work and labours of weaving *agbamevo kente*. Sitting in the loom on a small specially carpentered stool, the craftsman's body was not only surrounded by, but also in intimate contact with, the weaving apparatus. With the heddle peddles pressed up against the bare soles of his feet, the cloth beam in his lap, resting against his stomach as he works, his hand-hewn wooden shuttles nestled in each palm, the weaver's body intimately interfaced with his tools. Just as these tools were shaped by the human hand, so too must the weaver's body, in the process of learning to weave, bend and flex to accommodate them. This process of bodily accommodation and sensate response to the things involved in weaving a cloth is best characterised as the craftsperson learning from their tools and materials (Portisch, 2010: 67). The weaver's body and his tools thus intimately co-produced one another in the process of making cloth, such that the craftsperson's '... relationships with things is not a distant one: each speaks to [their] body and to the way [they] live' (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 49; see also Marchand, 2014).

At a basic level, this material entwinement was manifest in weavers' bodily attunement to the particularities of their loom, the feel of tools worn smooth against the push and pull of both hands and feet and an awareness of the elastic properties of the yarn with which they worked. More profoundly, however, it was experienced as sensations coursing through the body, shaping not only the body of the weaver but also giving rise to the affective texture of life in the weaving workshop. In this, we see how in Arendt's terms, the finite work of producing beautiful woven cloths is entangled with the unceasing, physical labour through which young craftsmen produce themselves, their bodies and the broader vocational community within which they are emplaced. Commitment to the craft entailed lengthy periods sat in one spot, hunched in the loom. As a learner weaver myself, I came to appreciate weaving as an entanglement between skilful and strong bodies, materials and tools which elicited particular sorts of sensual pleasure and pain. The satisfactions of making were manifest in bodily vitality and skilful practice coalescing in the production of beautiful and marketable cloths, with the obverse feeling taking shape as a hunger, the dull ache of back pain and legs seized by cramps that left weavers without the psychic or physical power to throw the warp threads or work the heddles with confidence. For weavers wracked by bodily pains incurred through contorting themselves at work, they faced an impossible

choice. They could either muster the strength to work through extreme discomfort, risking injury along the way, or step back from the loom to rest, knowing that according to the unforgiving calculus of making ends meet, this time was ‘wasted’ and meant the scarce resources of money and food would be stretched even further. From the perspective of long-term livelihoods, it was universally accepted that making in the loom was not a matter for old men, and that weavers who relied on the craft as they aged were playing a risky game. To be tied to the craft in this way and wholly reliant upon the frailties of the human body for one’s livelihood was a marker of insecurity which linked the making of cloth with the anxious uncertainties engendered by weavers’ experiences of economic crisis and foreclosed opportunities.

Insecurity and its relationship to being stuck in the loom were manifest not only in the bodily experiences of Agotime’s weavers but also in the material and imaginary ties which bound their work to particular places. In requiring large pieces of equipment as well as the space to lay out long lengths of warp thread, weavers were only able to practise their craft either in the workshop or at home. Considering that weaving was a time-consuming business, with skilled craftsmen spending upwards of a month producing each cloth, weaving was an occupation which tied young men to the workshop and in so doing kept them from other spaces and tasks which were imagined to be more productive or fulfilling. This tension was particularly apparent in the relationship between weaving and formal educational opportunities, which was shot through with the ‘not-yet’ of unfulfilled hope, the vagaries of craftwork and the labour of keeping going. In narrating their stories, young craftsmen routinely explained their work at the loom in terms of its capacity to further their aspirations for formal educational opportunities, with money earned through the sale of cloth paying school fees for them and their relatives.

In this, we see weaving not only as a way in which young men oriented themselves towards a hoped-for future in which schooling might free them from the loom, but also as a process whereby particular disciplinary regimes associated with work and education became embodied. This dynamic was not without its contradictions, however, and long, labour-intensive days spent weaving was time away from school. In this, at the same moment that craftwork opened up an imaginative space in which, through education, life might be lived differently, the material demands of labouring to produce cloth curbed the possibilities for change, keeping young weavers immobile and stuck in the loom.

Affective and social ties to kin and the wider community were an added dimension which, whilst making craftwork and a respectable life possible, also served to tie young men to the loom, circumscribing their hoped-for futures. Social prestige and respect accrued to men who had the means to provide for others, but for young weavers caught in the loom these affective ties were also a bind, the pressing weight of social responsibility in the here-and-now precluding their imaginings of a different kind of future. Whilst GD’s ties to the community were in some sense strong, when he himself eventually left the workshop for Accra, his departure was at least partly possible because he had no children or wife to support and his own parents lived elsewhere. For others enmeshed in dense webs of dependence, to leave and detach oneself in this way would have ruptured the sociality that gave life its value and shape. This did not, however, stop young weavers bemoaning in hushed tones the weight of social expectation they felt they shouldered. In her work on the bounded sociality of Oaxaca wood carvers in Mexico, Alanna Cant (2018: 66–67) points to the ways in which artisans can become bound to their craft through kinship relations imbued with affective respect. These forms of labour predicated on familial relations can be exploitative and compound craftspeople’s already precarious position in relation to the value of their craftwork and labour. For Cant’s (2018: 68) wood carvers, binding kinship ties were not viewed with suspicion or



negativity, but rather formed a natural part of local social norms. Likewise, to resist the demand made of intimate affective ties and renounce the claims of kin and community was, for young Ghanaian weavers, to invite accusations of *juju*, witchcraft and having ‘eaten alone’.

These temporal, material and social constraints, and the force with which they shaped weavers’ ambivalent relationship to the craft, can best be understood in terms of an underlying tension between the experience of hope and its immanent frustration. To the extent that craftwork was an income-generating activity that opened up avenues for existential mobility and opportunities for young weavers to become meaningfully emplaced within circuits of social and economic value, it had a hopeful momentum and force of its own. Drawing its power from a logic of sales, profit and investment, craft’s meaning hinged in large part upon its capacity to further young weavers’ personal projects of self-realisation, and the seductive anticipation of a future not tied to the loom. However, closely indexed to the capriciousness of macro-economic forces, the value of both cloth and the labour with which it was made were intensely vulnerable to the vagaries of currency fluctuations and the ever-escalating cost of living. Time in the loom was also measured as time not dedicated to study or entrepreneurial activities, occupations which in the brutal calculus of aspiration might be seen as more ‘productive’. These frustrations were made manifest in the bodies of older weavers, whose achy shoulders and knees were a stark reminder that remaining in the workshop long term and relying on the loom for one’s livelihood into middle age was a risky strategy, viewed by many as foolish.

Hopefulness and frustration, like waiting (see Stasik et al., 2020), were thus important functions of capitalism, with craft’s meaning, or indeed its lack, entwined on the one hand with an unstable money logic and its ephemeral and multifarious promises (see Schielke, 2015: 105, 124), and on the other with the sensory experience of weaving with a body which, over time, would become worn out through craftwork. For Kpetoe’s weavers, late capitalism was animated by the fraught anticipation of futures (see Weszkalnys, 2016: 130), which, in their conjoined uncertainty and power to seduce, were cruelly optimistic (see Berlant, 2011: 24).

## Heritage and village ties

Alongside both the practical considerations associated with the loom itself and the existential challenges of being a weaver, the cultural meanings attached to handwoven *agbamevo kente* further complicated weavers’ feelings for their work. *Kente* cloth, with its bold strips of colour and pattern, has come to be something of a national cultural symbol, with regional manifestations taking on particular sets of local meanings. Worn to celebrate births, to mark deaths, as wedding clothes and, most importantly, during local festivals, *agbamevo kente* was marketed by weavers through appeals to a history, heritage politics and identity that were rooted in place (see Clifford Collard, 2021). Weavers’ immobility then, perceived by potential customers as the ‘authenticity’ of their rootedness in Agotime and an imagined past, was crucially constitutive of the value of the cloths they produced. Much like the tantalising allure of educational opportunity, the urban middle-class consumers from Accra and Kumasi who commissioned and bought Agotime cloth, offered workshop members an opening onto a life beyond the loom whilst at the same time reasserting that the craft’s commodity value lay in the reproduction of a narrowly defined concept of tradition tied to the space of the village. Unsurprisingly, dissatisfaction was voiced in terms of being ‘stuck’ in the loom, the act of having to sit in one place to work on a cloth figuring as a form of both bodily and psychic inertia. At the same time, work in the loom had a value that

encompassed both the pressing needs of labouring to sustain one's livelihood and the social demand to be seen to be engaged in worthwhile work.

These imaginary and material elements which, socially patterned, together constituted craftsmen's sense that they were at the same time both immobile and on the cusp of a plethora of opportunities, imbued the workshop with what might be described as a tense affect. Shot through with the contradictory dynamic whereby the material realities of craft-work intersected with weavers' aspirations and their experiences of immobility, the affective space of the workshop was alive to both the power of hope and the pull of despair.

Jarrett Zigon's (2009: 259–262) theorisation of hope as arising out of the determined struggle to live through difficult times and accommodate ourselves to the social worlds in which we are emplaced, offers a framework for thinking about this tension. Zigon's work (2009: 265), based on an ethnography of Orthodox Christians living through Russia's post-Soviet crisis, contends that hope is actively maintained through perseverance and focus 'on the task at hand'. In this, hope becomes a property of everyday resilience, and to a certain extent endurance, enabling young people to withstand experiences of exclusion and abjection (see Scheper-Hughes, 2008). Considering the dialectical relationship between hope and hopelessness as '... the vital force behind one's ability to act and be in-the-world' (2009: 257). Zigon writes that '... to live a social life demands not only a background attitude of persevering hope through the everyday routines of that life, but also the active hope to keep going through the bad times, or the breakdowns, that are inevitable in all social and personal life' (2009: 268). For workshop weavers, the suffering of the present, which inhered in being 'stuck' in the village, was then a precondition of their hopefulness and crucially underpinned their imaginings of a better future (see also Turner, 2015). What is more, the accrual of suffering in the present amounted to a socially valorised form of endurance, in which young craftsmen could consciously develop, and all-importantly exhibit, the discipline of self-control (Hage, 2009b: 104). Nowhere was this nexus between self-discipline, endurance and 'not-yet' hopefulness more evident than in relation to Agotime weavers' religious practices.

## Religious practises and 'not-yet' hopefulness

The tendency to try to master life's uncertainties through techniques of self-discipline and spiritual labour is a recognised feature of life in the post-colony (see Gilbert, 2015; Marshall, 2009). In contexts of what Ruth Marshall (2009: 8) has termed 'radical uncertainty', in which '... the institutions, modes of thought, and disciplines instituted by colonialism have failed to provide the means for either understanding or mastering the ordeal of the present', individualising disciplinary strategies, directed towards the self, provide people with a semblance of control over their lives and destinies. An examination of young weavers' experiences in the Agotime workshop offers the possibility of understanding how such attempts to redress systemic social and economic dislocation intersect with particular modalities of crafting.

After my visit with GD to church that Sunday in the summer of 2015, he told me the story of how he had come to be a member there. As a child, he had gone with his brothers and sister to the Christian Missionary Fellowship, a Pentecostal church in the village. When GD was still at school, his father, a weaver, was involved in a serious car accident.<sup>6</sup> Although his father survived, his injuries meant that he could no longer work in the loom, and GD was forced himself to earn the money he needed to pay his school fees. Upon graduating from senior high school, an accomplishment of which he was proud as it marked several years of struggle and dedicated work, the Christian Missionary Fellowship

had promised GD a job in their headquarters in Accra. When he arrived in the capital, however, the fellowship had enrolled him in a bible school with the intention that he should train as a pastor. He lasted six months before abandoning the church with the feeling that he had been tricked not only out of a job but also a place within a spiritual community. For a few years, he tagged along with various relatives and friends, visiting a number of different churches but not committing to one. GD spoke of this time in a vacant way, as if he himself had been lost in his search for both spiritual leadership and the real-world opportunities that he felt should accompany belief. Listening to the radio one day in 2011, he tuned into the prophet Victor Mensah and what he heard had, in his own words, ‘spoken’ to him. Calling Mensah on the phone number that the prophet had shared on air, GD was invited along to the prophet’s church, Mighty Jesus Prayer Ministries, where he had been a member ever since.

A tale punctuated by set-backs and periods of waiting in which he had felt spiritually unfulfilled, GD’s narrative foregrounded endurance and the experience of suffering, linking spirituality with the labours of self-discipline through hard times, both in the form of work and dedication to the church. In an important sense then, GD’s on-going capacity to act and be in-the-world, was forged through a determination to persevere, with the sufferings and indignities of his current immobility, stuck in the loom and the village, a precondition of his hopefulness and his imaginings of a better future.

This determination was evinced in the assured tone with which GD spoke of the Prophet and his ministry, saying that after years of searching he felt he had finally found a spiritual home where he might safely invest both his time and hard earned money.<sup>7</sup> Framing his spiritual engagements in terms of a finely balanced calculus of effort and reward, GD presented Pentecostalist beliefs as a persuasive means of enacting capital’s logic that promised dividends both on the earthly plane and in the divine afterlife. Of this relationship, GD said that committed church attendance enabled congregants to ‘develop their mentality’. Faithful prayer, churchgoing, the giving of money as tithes and bible study were, then, a set of disciplinary techniques, through which church members were able elaborate and refine their relationship with the self (see Foucault, 1997: 223–251; Marshall, 2009: 142). One could argue, following Arendt (1958: 99), that these processes constituted a form of psychic, affective labour that in ‘[feeding] into the life process’ kept GD’s sense of the future alive.

### **Self-discipline and a ‘new work-ethic’**

It is in this constellation of practices that Pentecostal subjectivities are bringing forth a ‘new work-ethic’ (Gifford, 2004: 196) which in focusing upon individualised forms of discipline and aspirational work, ties spirituality to the social labours that sustain life.

Telling this story, GD presented himself as a wilful and self-possessed protagonist who, experiencing the disappointment of unfulfilled social promises made to him by family and his wider community, took the initiative and sought to realise his aspirations through forging a path for himself. Focussed on the capacity to endure setbacks and disappointments through discipline of self-work, GD’s narrative points to the emergence of a new kind of ethics premised on the careful cultivation of individualised forms of personhood.

These new conceptions of personhood were closely entwined with the tenets and practices of self-help, and alongside his Bible, GD carried a self-help guide with him to Sunday church. Slightly dog-eared and well-thumbed, the book was not used in the church’s programme, but its presence on GD’s lap was instead a performative reference to his ongoing self-work. Coupled with his neatly pressed shirt, smart trousers and new leather sandals that were reserved for church, the book communicated that GD was a man to be taken seriously,

with a destination in mind and a plan to get there. Looking through it on our way home that day, the book's cracked spine fell open to often-read pages with passages underlined in pencil, the marks and annotations a road map, tracing word by word the possibilities he imagined for his own personal transformation from a small town weaver into something else entirely. Resonating with an intimate emotional value, the book's materiality formed part of an affective field in which GD's committed religiosity was intertwined with capitalism's tantalising promise (see Schielke, 2015: 120).

The intent and earnest fastidiousness marked in the self-help text carried over into GD's assured comportment in the workshop. Arriving each morning at dawn, he routinely began his day by sweeping clean his loom, gathering small heaps of dust and detritus into careful piles before depositing them in the bin. That I, his apprentice, so often forgot this ritual before sitting down to weave seemed unfathomable to him, and he would quietly reprimand me before taking up the broom himself to clear the ground around my loom. When customers visited him in the workshop, he made sure to wear a smart shirt and spoke with a confident, formal courtesy that some other of his colleagues lacked. In the loom he crafted cloths that were made with precision and flair, each strip tightly woven in carefully measured blocks of colour and pattern which, when stitched together, composed bold and beautiful geometries across the textile's surface. Forever in search of business ideas and designs which would transform his fortunes from a one-man weaving operation to a textiles entrepreneur, GD's whole bearing was oriented towards distinguishing and forging a path for himself.

Much like commitment to the church, the philosophy and everyday routines of self-help presented GD with an opportunity to 'develop his mentality', opening up valuable avenues for self-determination and existential mobility in a context often characterised by economic crisis and the foreclosure of livelihood opportunities. Self-help thus constituted a set of practices that allowed GD to orient himself towards a future in which things should, and indeed might, be different. On the face of it, this was highly personal endeavour, which he pursued with and for himself. This labour of self-realisation was nonetheless grounded in the anticipation and social demands of becoming a proper adult person, with responsibilities and worthy of respect. Much like weaving itself, the discipline of religious and self-help practices were tied to young craftsmen's desire to meaningfully emplace themselves within rewarding and reciprocal networks of social relations (see Gilbert, 2015; Mains, 2012). Indeed, it is only within the context of Pentecostalism's intense sociality, bound as it is to the fraught tensions of kinship, social status and aspiration, that the affective and political labour of individual self-realisation can be fully grasped.

In tracing the possibility of better times to come that were rooted in projects of self-fashioning, the tenets of self-help mapped onto both Pentecostal religious practices and weavers' commitment to formal education, all three functioning as future-oriented practices that held out an unfulfilled yet seductive promise of transformation. Taken together they sustained a 'not-yet' hopefulness, in which individual patience, resourcefulness and the capacity to endure the present was both socially valorised and offered the possibility of peace and prosperity, if not in this life, then certainly in the next. Importantly, self-help infused Pentecostalism was an attempt to transform the cruel capriciousness of weavers' everyday lives, in which work and livelihoods were chronically uncertain and misfortune took many shapes, into a meaningful form of spiritual labour that sought God's everlasting glory.

## **Migration, immobility and the challenges of being left behind**

If religiosity opened up the possibility of existential mobility, providing young craftsmen like GD with a meaningful way of orienting themselves towards the future in a context riven by

uncertainty, young weavers' compelling imaginaries of migration were another avenue through which they prepared themselves for the future to come. These persuasive and alluring imaginaries were a complex, ambivalent mix of hopeful longing and apprehension, forged in weavers' careful attempts to situate themselves in the world and create alluring topographies that linked the spaces weavers called home with those of 'elsewhere'. Workshop members had endless questions about London, my 'hometown', and work in the loom opened up the opportunity for long conversations, comparing Kpetoe with Accra, Lomé, Lagos and the other towns and cities they had travelled to and lived in for work. Quizzed about everything from the food I ate at home, to the work my family did, this talk served to situate me within a realm which, if not known from direct experience, could at least be vividly described. In emplacing me within this imagined social space, these rich descriptions and stories of elsewhere also brought texture and an added dimension to the snippets of news, gossip and images, gleaned from smartphone screens, radio and newsprint, which, circulating in the workshop, tied life in the village to experiences of migration and broader currents of globalisation.

Pieced together carefully, the assembled fragments were a thoughtful labour through which workshop members sought to make sense of their place in the tangled and messy order of things. In their circulation, stories and images of 'elsewhere' became imbued with an affective power that provoked both desire and fear. Thinking through the seductive quality of these images and the space they opened up for specific kinds of self-realisation that were rooted in capitalist logics, migration can usefully be seen as a '... fashion, a form of consumption that ha[s] replaced earlier modes of self-production' (Newell, 2012: 208). Much like religious self-fashioning, ideas of migration were bound up with the cultivation of a self which, through the experience of protracted abeyance and abjection, was oriented towards a future in which things should be different. What was essentially at work here was a kind of 'cruel optimism', whereby attachment to the alluring idea of migration was maintained and indeed nurtured in spite of the structural violence and social dislocation which inhered in young men's experiences of trans-national mobility (Berlant, 2011: 24).

None of this is to say that young weavers were unaware of the brute realities which governed who could leave and who must stay. Indeed, whilst their on-going experience in the here-and-now of foreclosed opportunities and enforced immobility seemed not to dampen the allure of 'elsewhere', it afforded their perspective on the realities of im/mobility with a prescient veracity. At no time was this clearer than when, not long after I had settled into my workshop apprenticeship, GD turned, sitting in his loom, to ask me matter-of-factly if there was indeed a wall surrounding Spain to keep Africans out of Europe. I was shocked and embarrassed by the directness of his question, and also by my discomfort at realising that whilst our chat about people and places had, for me, masked the stark and unjustifiable inequality between us for, for GD it had brought it to the fore. Prevaricating, I mouthed some platitudes about the unfairness of it all, replying that there wasn't an actual wall but that there might as well be, given how perilous the journey to Europe was. GD's expression as I spoke was inscrutable and he said no more as I fell silent and we both returned to the pain-staking work of picking out patterns in neon rayon thread. He never returned to that astute, urgent question and my unease at how I had failed to adequately respond lingered. I recorded our exchange and the uncomfortable feelings it provoked for me in the notes I wrote that evening, our short exchange becoming a vivid and troubling memory. My thoughts were brought abruptly back to that conversation when, upon my return to London to begin the process of writing up in March 2014, striking, disturbing photographs of young African men scaling barbed wire topped fences started popping up on my computer screen, in the news and on Facebook. Showing the fence that cuts the Spanish enclave



of Melilla off from the rest of Morocco, the pictures, luminous and horrific, became part of a potent affective field. Even, or perhaps particularly from afar, as I looked at them from my home in London, these photos pointed to a dark reality about the relationship between mobility and power that GD had grasped and I had not (see Elliot, 2016).

As compelling as these images was the circulation of personal stories of migration coupled with the lived experience of being left behind. GD spoke of an uncle who, having left Kpetoe many years before on a US visa, disappeared, his family back home never hearing from him again. As GD told the story, a mix of bewilderment, betrayal and sharp resentment could be heard in his voice. It was clear that, beyond the immediate possibilities the visa held for GD's uncle, to have a relative go and work in the US had, for the wider family, represented an important avenue for realising their own projects for mobility. From GD's perspective, the renunciation of sociality which came with his uncle's deliberate disappearance represented not only the rupturing of important social ties but also the abrupt curtailment of the hopeful possibilities that he had imagined might follow for himself from the move. Vested with the aspirations of an entire extended family, it's unsurprising if the man who left felt that he was being expected to carry an unbearable weight. Yet, in disavowing the responsibilities his family felt he had towards them, GD's uncle's escape had painfully re-inscribed the immobility and stuckedness of those he left behind. Whilst GD said little more about this sore disappointment, it seemed to underline his sense that he alone would have to shoulder the responsibility for his own hopes for the future. With this, a piece of his family history became enmeshed within the broader circulation of images and stories about mobility and its sufferings, which together exerted an affective pull on GD, spurring him on in search of something better in the face of stark, sometimes brutal, challenges.

In the 18 months between the end of my workshop apprenticeship in November 2013 and returning to Kpetoe in June 2015, when GD took me with him to church, we had stayed in touch over WhatsApp, occasional messages and photos replacing, in attenuated form, the conversations we had had at our looms. Finishing that last piece of fieldwork, however, and immersing myself in the writing of the ethnography, we lost touch, my engagement with the textual form being given to the field drawing me away from the relationships which had made it. And so, it was only during a phone call with another workshop colleague a year later that I learnt that GD had left Kpetoe for Accra. He had been told there was work in the capital with a relative and so had gone, my friend on the phone unsure, or perhaps just being evasive, about what exactly GD was doing now. It seemed clear to me that it was unlikely GD intended to practise the craft in the city, but who knows what that offer of work had been. Certainly, from what I heard from workshop colleagues, the situation in the Kpetoe workshop did not sound great, many of the weavers I had known just three years before having left in search of other opportunities when it became clear that work in the loom had become too uncertain. Some, staying in Kpetoe, had looked elsewhere for sustenance, focussing instead on farming or even sale of goods at market. An occupation which in Ghana has conventionally been the domain of indomitable and powerfully organised market women, this kind of work has, in recent times been taken up out of necessity by young men, including workshop friends, with recourse to little else (see Overå, 2007). In a context where work and sociality are highly gendered, such transitions are not without consequence for notions of masculine respectability and point to the powerful ways that economic exigencies are reshaping the social value of work. Others, like GD, had left, preferring to try their luck in the hustle and flow of the big city, rather than waiting in a sleepy border town. Not unlike his uncle before him, it felt as if GD's departure for the capital was not only a loss, but had opened up a gap amongst those left behind, which they

were left to fill with their imaginings about where he had ended up and when, or indeed if, he would be back.

Those at least were my thoughts when I heard the news. With these questions, however, came the realisation that GD's life, despite it all, was still very much in motion. Amidst the everyday labours of keeping going in the face of chronic uncertainty, he was forging a path for himself which trod the fine line between hopefulness and despair. Negotiating this hopefulness through a will to persevere through the 'not-yet', he had indeed left the loom and the craft, which had seemed, in important ways, as much of an impediment as an opportunity for him and his workshop mates. In GD's story, and the important ways in which it remains open to the future, we see how the intersection between hope, labour, affect and uncertainty constitutes the realm of possibilities for many young men in Africa today. To look at the practices of endurance, self-discipline and imagination that characterise the experience of contemporary youth, we must then appreciate their inherent contradictions and seek to understand how they simultaneously opened up avenues of social action whilst reinscribing extant hierarchies and forms of existential immobility. Bound up with the plaintive demand that things *should be better* was both a nucleus of possibility that the future could be remade anew, and the weighty attachments, disappointments and frustrations of the present. It is in these close entanglements between the future's utopic dimensions and present realities that time and experience become animated and enlivened, their tense contradictions giving shape and meaning to what it is to labour hopefully in a time of uncertainty.

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### Notes

1. *Tro-tros* are minibuses, imported second-hand from Europe and retro-fitted with additional seats, that offer shared rides along fixed routes for a set price.
2. *Agbamevo kente* refers to the tradition of narrow strip weaving practised on four pole looms in Agotime, a community straddling the Ghana-Togo border.
3. In *The Method of Hope* Miyazaki positions hope as a method of knowledge, rather than its subject (2004: 3). This shift, whereby hope becomes a means of engaging with and comprehending the world, entails a temporal reorientation of knowledge towards anticipatory and open futures, which whilst indeterminate and fragile, contain, within their 'not-yet' character, a commitment to changing the world (Miyazaki, 2004: 14). The uncertainty and ambivalence of what is to come thus becomes the precondition of action in and with the world, providing an affective underpinning for the labour of keeping going.

4. In Arendt's terms, *aghamevo kente* can be classed as a "worldly object" and the durable product of *homo faber's* work upon materials.
5. Between 2010, when I first visited the workshop in Kpetoe, and 2015 when I returned for my last period of fieldwork, Ghana's consumer price index had risen by more than 60%. Whilst the fortunes of Kpetoe's craftsmen are not tied solely to such macro-economic indicators, these figures point to the magnitude of the economic challenges craftsmen like GD were up against.
6. Weaving in Kpetoe, like the practise of the craft across much of West Africa, is highly gendered and often learnt within families, fathers and uncles apprenticing sons and nephews as part of the work of the household.
7. GD contributed to a collection each Sunday as well as setting aside ₵5 each month for a church fund that helped congregants defray unexpected expenses, such as medical bills and funeral costs. Whilst this money was a form of mutual insurance, the Sunday collections funded the upkeep of the ministry's leadership.

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**Niamh Jane Clifford Collard** is a post-doctoral researcher at SOAS University of London. Her doctoral work was an ethnography of a weaving workshop in southern Ghana, which traced the intersection between young weavers' aspirations, ideas of heritage and religious practices and their broader livelihood strategies. She is currently working on a project looking at the politics of roads, mobility and climate change in South Asia.